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Andy Warhol: Beyond the Surface

In regards to Pop Art, Andy Warhol enriched the movement by focusing his attention on depicting in great detail the condition of America's capitalist society. Fascinated and interested in the concepts of fame and wealth, Warhol focused on both the positive and negative aspects of celebrity and commodity culture of America. When asked about the deep, complex meaning behind his works, Warhol simply replied "...just look at the surface of my paintings...There's nothing behind it..." (Goldsmith, 90). Warhol's ambiguous nature and unwillingness to explain the hidden complexities of his works, created the idea that in order to understand his work, the viewer must simply take each work at face value, instead of trying to think of a complex idea in order to gain understanding of the piece. Although Warhol stated that in order to understand his works one should "just look at the surface" of his works to find meaning, his subject matter in the "Death and Disaster" series contradicts his claim that his work must be taken at face value and instead showcases the complexity of economic, political, and social issues that were prevalent in American society during the 1960s (Goldsmith, 90).

Born into a middle class Slovakian immigrant family, Warhol came from humble origins and spent a portion of his childhood growing up in the ethnic ghetto of Pittsburgh. However

Warhol made an effort to hide his background by creating a persona that allowed him to control how people perceived him and his work. In order to maintain this persona he carefully crafted, Warhol remained mysterious and would reveal nothing about his past, and instead would focus his image on his larger than life persona that was closely associated with money, fame, and luxury. When asked about his past, Warhol remarked that he "...prefer[ed] to remain a mystery..." and that he would "...never give [his] background..." away but would rather "...make it all up different every time..." (Goldsmith, 87). Instead of focusing on his background, the artist wanted to explore his own fascination with fame and celebrities that started when he was a child and continued into his adult life. For Warhol, his persona was just another dimension to his artistic vision of portraying the popular, consumer culture of America. Warhol's persona of a larger than life character only interested in fame and wealth was an extension of a hyperbole of the image of American culture he was trying to depict in his art. The superficial nature of Warhol's persona helped to reflect and emphasize the nature of his art, which often focused on America's obsession with celebrities and fame. Instead of giving a straightforward answer about his work, Warhol played up his persona to reflect the complex, superficial nature of American culture he often incorporated in his works. Ultimately, Warhol's person undermined the complex nature of his works and how they reference the political, economic, and social stance and ideals that America held throughout Warhol's lifetime.

While many of Warhol's works help show the impact of capitalism and commodities in American culture, Warhol's "Death and Disaster" continued exploring the subject of American life and focused primarily on portraying the dark aspects of America. For his "Death and Disaster" series, Warhol used relevant images in American culture in the 1960s in order to

accurately reflect and depict the ideals and current events facing America. Warhol used images that alluded to political and social issues regarding the acceptance of racism, involvement in the cold war, and the use of the death penalty in the American justice system. The images and subject matters addressed in “Death and Disaster” show how things that can be seen as good, such as capitalism and democracy, can also lead to injustice and destruction.

In Warhol’s “Death and Disaster” series, the work “Race Riots” (1964) is a piece that contradicts the one dimension meaning of just merely look upon the work’s surface, but instead reveals the complexity and contradictory nature of American culture and government. The original image used Warhol used for his “Race Riots” was taken by photographer Charles Moore and was used in a Life magazine article (See Fig. 1). Moore’s image of the black man being attacked by a police dog during a peaceful protest was entitled “The Dog’s Attack is Negroes’ Reward” (Moore, 1963). The article portrayed the African American peaceful protestors in a negative light, while portraying the use of police force in repressing the actions of the peaceful protestors in a positive, favorable light. This accepted act of racism toward African Americans for exercising their right to peacefully protest and assemble, which is outlined and granted to all American citizens in the Fifth Amendment. During the 1960s, Life was regarded as the “single most important organ of the media, reaching more than half of the adult population”, which shows the powerful force of racism and prejudice present in American society toward African Americans (Wagner, 1996). Life’s article “Dog’s Attack is Negro’s Reward” shows just how accepted racism and prejudice were in American society. Racism was so accepted in America, that blatant prejudice was show and promoted in the pages and article titles of one of America’s most influential sources for news during the 1960s, Life magazine.

Warhol's "Race Riots" contradicts the statement that his work should be taken at face value because the photograph choice and presentation of the image, which added more complexity to the discussion concerning racism in America. When reprinting the Life magazine photograph, Warhol removed the article source, and instead focused on the image of the man being attacked by a police dog during a peaceful demonstration. Separating the Moore's photograph from the racist Life magazine article title prevents the viewer from using the article title as justification for the racist actions shown in the photograph. Additionally, the separation between Moore's photograph and the Life magazine article expands and broadens the context of the photograph in American society (See Fig. 1). While Life magazine's article "Dog's Attack is Negroes' Reward" restricts the image to a single event, the civil rights protests in Birmingham, Alabama, Warhol's "Race Riots" eliminates the image's association with the Life article and instead lets the image represent the acceptance of racism in American culture during the 1960s. The image of racism isn't confined to the town of Birmingham, Alabama, which was "notably resistant to protestors' instance on their most basic human rights", but rather shows an image of racism that represents America as an entire country, rather than a single town (Wagner, 1996). In certain works of "Race Riots", Warhol used the color imagery of the United States' flag as an allusion to the principal ideas America was founded on (See Fig. 2). The use of American flag color imagery adds a new dimension and adds new symbolism to the photograph of accepted racism in American culture. America is a nation that prides itself on incorporating equality, democracy and liberty into all aspects of government and society. These ideals are starkly contrasted by the photograph showing racial inequality in America. In addition to certain prints of "Race Riots" having symbolic color imagery, the name of the piece that Warhol chose

also adds complexity to the image. Instead of calling the piece “Dogs’ Attack is Negroes’ Reward”, the Life magazine article title, Warhol changed the title to convey a message that is separate from the message that was presented in the article. The title “Race Riots” is satirical in nature because the photograph doesn’t show a riot at all, but rather a peaceful protest. The subtle nature of the name “Race Riots” alludes to the idea that racism is constantly justified by individuals who believe they are suppressing a “riot”, instead of what is happening in reality, a peaceful protest. Warhol’s “Race Riots” is a complex piece that displays the social contradictions and inequalities that were present in America during the 1960s.

In addition to “Race Riots”, Warhol used the image of the electric chair, to explore and showcase a topic of debate in America during the 1960s. The time period of Warhol’s Electric Chairs is significant because up until the 1950s and 60s, the death penalty was a widely accepted measure of justice in America. During the 1920s and 1940s society viewed the death penalty as “a necessary social measure” that must be taken in order to preserve social justice (Dieter, 2011). However, during the 1950s capital punishment rates began to decline and continued to decline during the 1960s. In 1966, public support and opinion toward capital punishment reached an historical all-time low in American during that time “at only 42%” according to a Gallup poll (Dieter, 2011). Public opinion towards capital punishment during the 1950s and 60s was influenced by the court case, *Trop v Dulles* (1958). The Supreme Court decide in *Trop v Dulles* that the “Eighth Amendment contained an ‘evolving standard of decency that marked the progress of a maturing society’”, which led to a widespread discussion on the constitutionality of the death penalty. (Death Penalty Curricula, 2001). The debate

concerning capital punishment is embodied in Warhol's Electric Chair paintings because they serve as a reflection into the social dynamics of the 1960s.

Besides the importance of the era in which Warhol's Electric Chair paintings were created, it is crucial that the exact dates of the works are taken into account when analyzing for the historical representation of the paintings. Warhol's first Electric Chair painting entitled "Lavender Disaster" (See Fig. 3) was produced in 1963, "...the same year Sing Sing State Penitentiary in New York carried out the state's last execution, that of Eddie Lee Mays on August 15..." (Capers, 2006). Warhol's use of the electric chair image in his "Death and Disaster" series is not random, but rather significant because of the subject matter and the era it was created. Moreover, Warhol's Electric Chair paintings are more complex than the surface image because each electric chair Warhol used in his "Death and Disaster" series, was an actual electric chair used for executions (Capers, 2006). For example, Warhol's piece "Blue Electric Chair" (See Fig.4) is connected to the executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, a couple who were tried and convicted for acts of espionage against the US government (Capers, 2006). By having each electric chair connected to real instances of capital punishment use, it emphasizes the debate in American during the 1960s that was focused on whether capital punishment was a violation against the eighth amendment, which stated that the justice system shouldn't include any instance of "cruel and unusual punishment". The historical background and context found in Warhol's Electric Chair paintings invalidates his claim that his work should be taken at surface value, and instead gives the painting a deeper meaning that comments on the political and social dynamics of American society during the 1960s.

In addition to the historical roots and association each electric chair has to an execution, Warhol adds intricacy to the electric chair pieces by presenting the chairs in such a way that viewers reevaluate the device and the role it plays in American society. In regards to visual characteristics of the Electric Chair paintings Warhol used a rectangular grid to help “...manipulat[e] the size of the photo...” which helped to focus the viewer’s attention “...on the mechanics of death and its replication...” (See Fig. 3 and 4). (Golec, 2009). The use of “the rectangular grid and the austerity of the execution room suggest the cold ‘efficiency’ of electrocution...” shows how efficiency is so incorporated into American culture, that it is even applied to the death penalty (Golec, 2009). In addition to the electric chair’s efficiency, Warhol’s repetition of the electric chair captures its iconic status in American culture. The constant use of the image of an electric chair in the “Death and Disaster” series emphasizes America’s fascination with death and the capital punishment within the justice system (Golec, 2009). Warhol’s Electric Chair paintings are complex because they reveal society’s desire to incorporate efficiency into every aspect of society, even if it is considered to be inhumane.

Warhol’s Atomic Bomb paintings were created during the cold war, when tensions between the United States and Soviet Union resulted in mass panic and fear across America (See Fig. 5). The event of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, which lasted 13 days, led to a widespread concern about the possibility of a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. After the Cuban Missile Crisis, the image of nuclear warfare became an image of popular culture throughout society (Jones, 2002). During the Cold War, when an American opened their newspaper, they “saw a mushroom cloud next to an advert for shoes or gossip about Elizabeth Taylor” because the possibility of nuclear war became a symbol of popular

culture during a time of widespread panic and possibility of mass destruction (Jones, 2002). The sheer magnitude of the Cold War, caused the media and American society to become fixated on imagery concerning war and destruction. Although World War II modernized technology used for war, the Cold War excelled this progression and led to an increase in nuclear weaponry. As the Cold War continued, scientists began to develop hydrogen bombs, which are considered to be “thousand times bigger than atomic bombs” (Types of Nuclear Bombs, 2005). In 1952, the United States became the first nation “to successfully test a 10 MT fusion bomb”, which accelerated the pace of nuclear weapon development during the war (Types of Nuclear Bombs, 2005). The fusion, or hydrogen, bomb the United States developed in 1952 revolutionized warfare during the Cold War and led to the United States being able to manufacture bombs that were “700 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima” (Saucerman, 37). When the United States tested the first hydrogen bomb by dropping it “on the Elugelab Atoll in the Pacific Marshall Islands”, the bomb “instantly vaporized an entire island and left behind a crater more than a mile wide” (Soviets Explode Atomic Bomb, 2014). In response to the United States’ creation of the first hydrogen bomb, the Soviet Union in 1955 “detonated its first hydrogen bomb on the same principle of radiation implosion” which led to both the United States and the Soviet Union to encourage nuclear competition with each other (Soviets Explode Atomic Bomb, 2014). Warhol’s Atomic Bomb paintings portray the technological advancements made during the Cold War, and the capability countries had in carrying out mass destruction.

While Warhol’s Atomic bomb paintings aimed at showing how nuclear weapons affected American culture, they also commented on how the constant images of destruction can lead to desensitization. Warhol said in an interview that “...when you see a gruesome

picture over and over again, it really doesn't have any effect..." which is an idea that can be applied to the concept of the desensitization towards images of war and death (Goldsmith, 2004). Although images of death and destruction are initially disturbing, the constant repetition of the image can lead to the viewer accepting the image as normal, which in turn reduces the shock value of images showing mass destruction (See Fig. 5). Images of mushroom clouds placed next to advertisements or celebrity gossip in American newspapers shows the effect of reducing and diminishing the horror of war, to a mere image of popular culture. Warhol noticed this particular phenomenon when he said that "when you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it really doesn't have any effect", because the longer an individual views an image, the weaker the impression it will have on the viewer (Goldsmith, 2004). The repetition of the mushroom cloud in Warhol's Atomic Bomb paintings gradually loses its effect and shock value after the viewer notices that the work is a series of repeated images. The Atomic Bomb paintings are intricate because Warhol replicated how the media portrayed nuclear events and disasters during the cold war, which gives insight into how Americans perceived the events of the Cold War.

Overall, Warhol's "Death and Disaster" series proves that his works are very intricately constructed and has a lot of meaning that would be lost if the paintings were simply evaluated at surface value. Warhol's works not only represent the subject that is depicted, but also the effects it had on American society. For example, both "Race Riots" and "Lavender Disaster" are two paintings that depict an image of an idea that was once widely accepted in the United States. When the images "Race Riots" and "Lavender Disaster" are separated and focused on a silk screen canvas, the aspects of dark, harsh realities of 1960s American culture are revealed

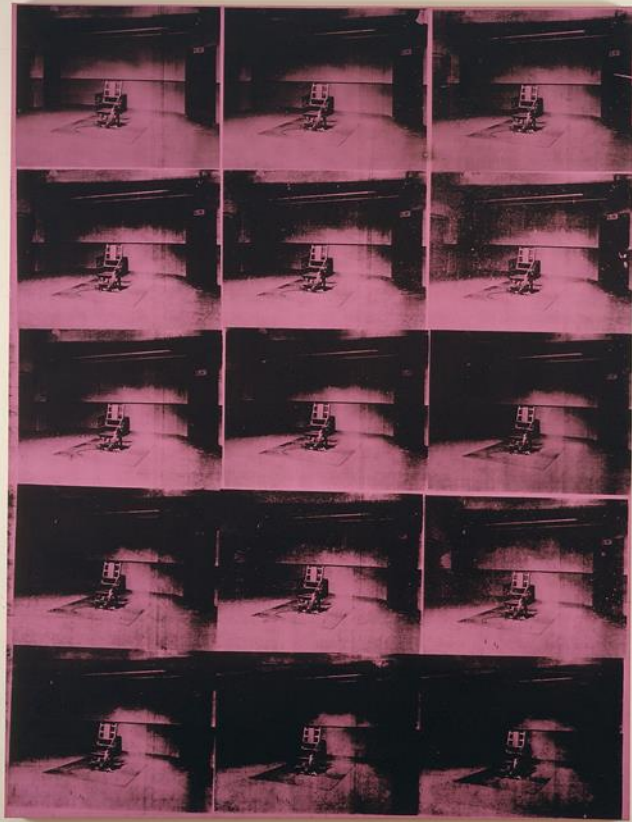
and emphasized. The repetition of “Race Riots”, “Electric Chairs” and “Atomic Bomb” represent the prolonged effects these ideas and events had on society. The repetition of “Race Riots” reveals the enduring nature of racism throughout American history. Similarly Warhol’s Electric chair paintings such as “Lavender Disaster” and “Blue Electric chair” utilized repetition to show that the death penalty has endured in the American justice system. Additionally, Warhol’s Atomic Bomb paintings incorporate repeating images that represents the constant bombardment of not only events of destruction during the Cold war, but also the media’s role in the desensitization of society. In conclusion, Warhol’s suggestion to only evaluate at the surface of his work was a reflection of his public persona and greatly ignores as well as undermines the social and political characterization of American society during the 1960s.



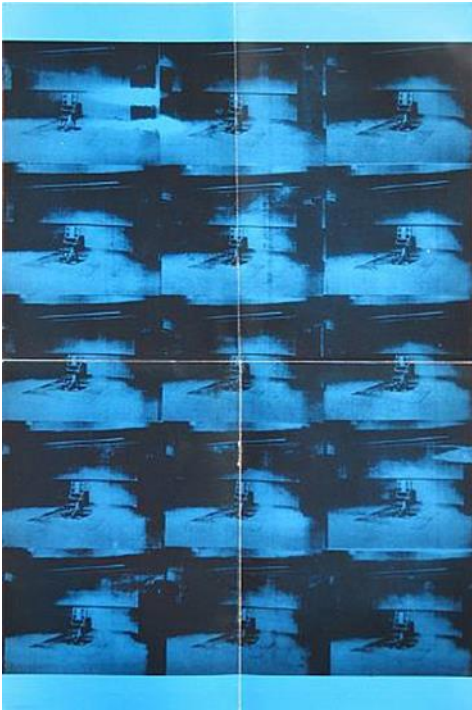
“Race Riots” (Fig. 1)



“Race Riots” (Fig. 2)



“Lavender Disaster” (Fig. 3)



“Blue Electric Chair” (Fig. 4)



“Atomic Bomb” (Fig. 5)

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